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REPORT TO PARENTS

Custody for Children

Five Years of Age and Younger



Mary F. Whiteside, Ph.D.
Ann Arbor Center for the Family

Judicial Council of California Administrative Office of the Courts

William C. Vickrey
Administrative Director of the Courts

Kiri Torre, Director
Trial Court Services Division

Isolina Ricci, Manager
Statewide Office of Family Court Services

Wendy Constantine, Program Manager
Family Court Services Grant Program

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Custody for Children Five Years of Age and Younger



Separation and divorce can present many difficult challenges for parents of young children. At a time when you are making many changes in your life, you may be experiencing personal turmoil and, perhaps, emotional pain. You are also struggling to find ways to be the best parent you can be for your children. The purpose of this report is to help provide some ideas for you in this regard.

The report is mainly written for the 80 to 90 percent of parents who provide a safe environment for their children, themselves, and the other parent. For families in which there is serious substance abuse, violence, neglect, or sexual abuse, developing and maintaining an appropriate, safe, and successful parenting plan after divorce is very complicated, most often needing referral to appropriate agencies as well as to counselors and other professionals.

For this report, we gathered information from studies done between 1970 and 1993 of families whose children were age 5 or younger at the time of parental divorce or separation. We should note, however, that the available research is limited. A broader range of divorcing families with infants and toddlers needs to be studied. For example, much research has been done with preschool-age children in divorcing families, but often the important role of the father was not examined. Despite these limits, we were able to gather much information that we hope will be helpful to you and your children.

WHAT YOUNG CHILDREN NEED FROM THEIR DIVORCED OR SEPARATED PARENTS

There are not any formulas for parenting young children before, during, and after divorce that guarantee success. We do know, however, that children in divorcing families, like all children, have certain needs, and that you and the other parent can do things that will help your child cope better with the divorce experience. Although we do know that most families return to a calmer and more stable state by two years after divorcing, your children need your help now, as well as later on, in order to adjust to the changes in their lives and tackle the task of growing up.

Families of all shapes, sizes, and varieties, including divorced families, can give young children what they need. And parents do not need to be perfect. Nevertheless, when their parents live separately, young children need the following basics:

- Parents who provide them with warmth, affection, and love.

- Parents who are sensitive and responsive to their needs and feelings, while still setting appropriate and firm limits to help guide the children's development.
- Parents who know their children well and spend time playing with, teaching, and caring for their children.
- Nonparental caregivers, when involved (baby-sitters, daycare providers, family members, etc.), who are stable, consistent, sensitive to the children, and accepted by both parents.
- A mother and father who control their negative feelings, especially in front of the children—and who have found other ways and other places to vent their anger and hurt.
- A mother and father who exchange information respectfully and regularly, and who decide which parenting decisions need to be made together and which can be made by one parent.
- A mother and father who can constructively solve problems and resolve differences that affect their children.
- Adequate food, clothing, toys, and equipment. Access to good medical care and education.

It is also helpful to children whose parents live separately if the parents feel good about themselves and if grandparents, other family members, and close friends, when involved, support the roles of both parents, and can be consistent, sensitive, and helpful “advisors.”

Wherever children are through the day—at mother's home, at father's home, and at daycare or school—children need to be with adults who are warm and comforting; who listen carefully; who help make sense of the world; and who provide enough interesting things to do and think about. It is best for children when parents are respectful to each other, and when parents support one another as parents at the same time they follow separate paths in their personal lives. Children do best when negative feelings between adults are expressed in a mature manner, not in front of the children, and when the parents find ways of resolving their disagreements.

DEVELOPING COMMON GROUND AS PARENTS

All couples have differences in their ideas about what is important for their children. When they live in the same household, parents have chances to struggle with their differences and agree upon a style of parenting (a “common ground”). By talking about their different opinions and views, parents can learn from each other and the child gets the best of both parents. For example, a father may be the one most worried about safety, insisting on the most up-to-date car seat, and installing gates at the top of the stairs and child safety-latches on the cabinets. The mother in this family may feel strongly that the child should develop independence, standing by the slide as the child climbs to the top, rather than lifting the child up. The result is a child who feels both safe and independent.

Unfortunately, it is much more difficult for parents to develop a common ground when they live separately. It is easier for parents to believe their ideas and worries are not listened to and that the other parent is making a mistake. In our example, when parents live separately, the father may see the mother's encouragement of independence as "unsafe," while the mother may see the father's concern with safety as "overprotective." The child needs to be both safe and independent in both homes. The key to developing common ground while living separately is regular, constructive ("win-win") communication and problem-solving between you and your former partner about your concerns, and about the activities, problems, and successes of your child. It is also important to identify, for yourself, what you can do to reassure the other parent that you are listening to his or her concerns. Equally important, decide what you need from the other parent to believe your concerns are being taken seriously. Returning to our example, if the father sees the child strapped in the car seat every time the child arrives, he may see that the mother agrees with him that safety is important. If the father and child proudly describe the child's successful mastery of the slide in the park to the mother, she hears that the father will support the child's independence. As a result, both parents feel that they are an important part of their child's development, as well as understood and respected by each other, and the child is helped to grow.

SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

How can my child's other parent and I work together? If we could cooperate, we wouldn't be getting a divorce!

Couples differ a great deal in what type of parenting team they can create after divorce. Some form a cooperative, flexible team with mutual respect and support. Some develop a more distant, but business-like partnership, where they aren't friends, but they discuss important issues, coordinate their households when necessary, and have ways of resolving disagreements. Others live a more parallel existence. They don't fight, but they also don't talk much either. For these parents, disagreements are avoided by keeping each household separate. Finally, others fulfill our worst stereotypes about divorce. They remain locked in endless, painful fights, losing sight of the good qualities of the other parent and forgetting their children's needs.

We know with great sureness that, for children of all ages, ongoing conflict between parents may lead children to feel bad about themselves, to become disobedient and uncooperative, to have school problems, and to have trouble getting along with friends. The more children feel "in the middle" of their parents' disputes (that is, being the message carrier between parents, feeling that they are expected to take sides with one parent or another, or feeling that they caused their parents' disputes), the worse the conflict may be for the children.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

- Agree on a time, place, and way to communicate (e.g., face-to-face or by phone) that is convenient for both of you. Parenting conversations held on a regular basis help prevent misunderstandings and smooth the child's experiences of living in two homes.
- Try to have problem-solving parenting conversations when the children are not present.
- Find neutral spots like restaurants, libraries, or coffee shops for meetings. Such places may encourage calm conversation and give each parent the freedom to leave, if necessary.
- Begin by sharing information and continue with problem-solving as long as the conversation remains constructive.
- Agree that either parent can end the conversation if it becomes too uncomfortable or not constructive. When ending the conversation, agree that the subject will be continued at the next conversation. Over time, even five minutes of constructive conversation every week leads toward good decisions.
- Separate parenting conversations from conversations about other subjects. Try talking about other subjects at a different time.

IMPORTANT: What affects children is not that their parents have disagreements, but how and when these disagreements are expressed and how parents go about resolving them. No child is too young to notice parental conflict. Hostile, repeated, unresolved parental conflict will be sensed by your children, and can be bad for their emotional adjustment—even if you avoid the other parent most of the time.

I have heard that it is bad for babies to be away from their mothers. I have also heard that it is bad for children to be away from their fathers. How can we both be with our children and work too?

Children will benefit from time with their mothers and their fathers. It is not true that any amount of time children spend away from their mothers is necessarily harmful. Children who must be away from both parents for large amounts of time can cope well with these separations if they are getting good quality daycare and if their time with their parents is not too stressful. It is best if the children remain consistently with the same caregivers (that is, baby-sitters, daycare workers, grandparents, or other family members). The fewer changes in the daycare providers, the better. Children should be in the care of people who will be sensitive and responsive to their needs and give them affection, warmth, and a sense of security. A daycare provider with a special, close ongoing relationship with the child (called an "attachment") can be a very helpful secure anchor during the stressful separation period.

Because children who have relationships with both parents do need time with both parents on a regular basis, it is best if separated or divorced parents can work together to increase the time they each have with their children. When separated parents are both working, there may be few hours left in the day or the week for each parent to be with the children. In many families, the children's schedule will include lots of time with caregivers other than the parents, with the remaining time split between working parents. This situation could leave children without enough time with either parent.

Creative solutions can help solve this problem. For example, many parents of young children work out schedules in which the time with one parent is when the other parent is at work or in school. This arrangement has several advantages. First, each parent has more time with the children than he or she would have if they were both away from the children at the same time. Second, this arrangement reduces the children's time with caregivers other than parents while increasing their time with both parents. This will benefit all family members.

Not all parents can work out this type of staggered work schedule, however. For these families, it is typically best if children are not in the care of persons other than their parents for more than 40 daytime hours a week. Parents should watch their children for signs of stress and difficulty managing changes, which may mean their children are in more hours of daycare than they can handle, and work together to lower the amount of time their children must spend in daycare.

If I want to see my child every day or every other day, he'll be changing houses all the time. But if I wait for three days or longer, it seems too long. What's the best schedule?

Research studies have not looked at questions such as how long can young children go without seeing either parent, how many transitions per week can children handle, and how long should children stay in each household. Most children who are in full-time daycare are away from their mothers and fathers for up to nine or ten hours, five days per week. Under these circumstances, we know from the daycare research that children can become securely attached to the daycare providers when the relationships are good and consistent over time.

In the divorce situation, practitioners recommend that when possible, infants and toddlers see each parent often, without long periods of absence from either parent. The goal is for the children to become strongly and securely attached to both parents. Consistency and regularity of these schedules is very important to establish a routine and give children a sense of predictability.

Most important, however, in deciding schedules for young children to be with each parent is the quality of the relationships. These include both the relationships between the child and each parent and the interactions between the mother and the father.

I was the parent who stayed home and did most of the childcare. My former partner was not there for the fussiness, the fevers, and the first steps. I'm not sure my former partner can handle much time with the baby alone. How can I know that the baby is all right when she isn't with me?

Traditionally, fathers in the United States have spent less time than mothers providing daily care for infants and toddlers by themselves. After separation, fathers' time with children may include more of the caregiving tasks formerly done mainly by the mothers. Both fathers and mothers may, at first, question the fathers' ability to properly care for the children without mothers' help.

Research clearly shows that fathers can be as capable as mothers in caregiving, regardless of the children's ages. Mothers often are inexperienced before caring for their first baby, but "learn on the job," often with the help and advice of family, friends, and sometimes professionals. Fathers are no different. Given the opportunity and support, divorced fathers can care for their children lovingly and responsibly during visits or when parents share custody.

It is common, after divorce, for parents to lack confidence in their own or their former spouse's parenting skills. It is important for parents who are more experienced in childcare than their former spouses to be patient and supportive during the learning period. Challenging and criticizing each other's parenting will slow this process, creating tension and conflict. By contrast, the more experienced parent can be most helpful by sharing information about the children. It is important that parents who are less experienced in childcare be committed to a responsible learning process and sensitive to the other parent's need for reassurance about how things are going when the children are away. The goal for both parents is to build a mutually respectful and experienced parenting team.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR LESS EXPERIENCED PARENTS

- Begin with less time with your child at first, and slowly increase your time alone with your child as you take responsibility for more activities and as the other parent becomes more relaxed.
- Be part of a learning network (for example, from extended family, other parents, parenting classes).
- Be open to information from the other parent.
- Commit to a regular schedule. This may mean talking with your employer about your work schedule and sick time for doctor's appointments.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR MORE EXPERIENCED PARENTS

- Allow the other parent the chance to gain childcare experience, not only during play, but also in meeting the children's day-to-day needs (such as providing meals, dressing, bathing, naps and bedtime, caring for when sick).
- You may have doubts about the other parent's caregiving skills. If so, identify for yourself and communicate clearly to the other parent what information you need to reassure you about the caregiving the children are receiving when they are out of your care.

- Know that children can respond well to many different ways of caring for them. It is usually not a problem for most children, whether parents are together or separated, if parents do some things a little differently from one another.
- Share information with the other parent about your children's needs, routines, and preferences. For example, what are their favorite foods? What soothes them when upset? What helps them settle down for bed? Be open to new information about your children that your former spouse may discover while "learning on the job."
- Discuss constructively with the other parent how your children behave when coping well with changes and new experiences and when they are feeling stress or upset.

My former spouse comes from a "rules and regulations" family. My family is more laid back and creative. I worry that our child will grow up very mixed up as he goes back and forth between such different households.

There is no research information available about the ways that children adjust to differences between parents' households or which kinds of differences between parents' households may be important to children of various ages. We do know, however, that one of the things that very young children need to learn is that the world around them is predictable and understandable. Familiar routines help them develop confidence in themselves and trust in the world around them. Ideally, those adults caring for a child should share information and decide together what routines (for eating, sleeping, and separating from a parent) work best, given the child's needs and practical considerations. Keeping these routines consistent across the different settings (that is, mother's house, father's house, and daycare) will help the child feel more secure and will help smooth transitions between settings.

Children differ in their ability to be flexible about changes. Some children seem to "go with the flow" and like new experiences. Others become overstimulated and fussy, and have a hard time calming down when they experience changes. All children have limits to what they can tolerate at any given time, and they have ways of telling us "This is too much!" Some children get grumpy, some become very quiet, some become disobedient, whereas others may behave immaturely. It is important for parents to recognize the signals their children give and talk about what they can do to reduce their children's stress. For example, some children need changes in routine to happen slowly over time so that they have the chance to get used to changes. During the transitions, when children change from one parent's care to the other's, children need the most support and understanding from both parents. Because these times are also very difficult for parents, it is wise to plan ahead carefully and develop comfortable routines for saying, "See you later," and "We are both very proud of you."

How important is it that separated parents live nearby each other?

Research studies show that the farther away the visiting parent lives from the children's residential household, the less often that parent visits the child. Particularly for very young children, an important relationship can develop only if the parent and child spend time together. It can be hard to keep a meaningful parental relationship with a young child if one parent lives too far away. Long drives are stressful for both parent and child and make it difficult to arrange frequent visits. In these cases, the family relationship between the nonresidential parent and the child is likely to become similar to the relationship between the child and an extended family member, such as an aunt or uncle.

NO COMMON GROUND: NORDEEN AND JACK

Nordeen feels strongly that babies need their mothers to care for them during the day. After her divorce from Jack, Nordeen found working outside of the home necessary to make ends meet. She is angry she must now spend time away from her son, Sean, and also feels guilty for leaving him with a baby-sitter. She worries that Sean will be mad at her for leaving him, and that he might come to love the baby-sitter more than her. Nordeen also resents that Sean's time with his father takes away from the few free hours she has to spend with the baby. To make matters worse, Jack has a new girlfriend. The thought of Sean liking his father's girlfriend is almost unbearable for Nordeen. She finds herself feeling constantly upset, making it difficult to relax and have fun with Sean when they are together. All she can think about is her frustration and her worries. When Sean gets cranky, she finds herself impatient and irritable. She can't think of good ways to help the baby get used to the changes in their lives, and she ends up feeling even worse. She misses the quiet, affectionate times she and Sean had together before the separation.

Sean's father agrees with the importance of mothers for babies and is willing to start with short visits with Sean, gradually increasing the length. However, he is afraid that Nordeen doesn't see him as important and would be happier if she could shut him out of Sean's life altogether. He feels stretched to the limit, working overtime, beginning a new relationship, and finding time for Sean. When Nordeen suggests changing his work schedule to give Sean more time with both of them, Jack finds himself arguing with Nordeen about the importance of his income, despite wanting to be helpful and reasonable. Jack is not sure about what role his girlfriend should have with Sean, but he feels he needs her help caring for Sean. He thinks Nordeen is being unreasonable and jealous when she demands that Sean not be left with Jack's girlfriend. Both Jack and Nordeen are worried about Sean's increased fussiness and that, since the separation, Sean has been frequently sick.

Their situation reached a crisis point when Sean had to be hospitalized briefly, dehydrated from serious diarrhea. Jack and Nordeen both were embarrassed to find themselves yelling at one another in front of the doctor when underneath they were worried sick about Sean. Following this, they sought out a mediator with knowledge about small children, and they have made some agreements about their concerns. They agreed to take a parenting or coparenting class at the local YMCA. Nordeen found a support group for divorced women. Jack called the Stepfamily Association of America for information about introducing a new partner into the household. Jack agreed to limit Sean's time with his new girlfriend until Nordeen becomes comfortable enough to meet her in person. They both worked with their employers to coordinate their schedules so that Sean has more time with each of them.

How can grandparents be helpful?

The most helpful grandparents accept the separation, regardless of their own feelings, and provide needed support to parents and children. It is best if grandparents can keep an open mind about both parents and use their relationships to lessen, rather than increase, anger and tension between the parents.

The least helpful grandparents are those who take sides in the divorce, discourage direct communication between parents, and put down one or both parents. It can be helpful when divorcing spouses coach their families to be polite and respectful of the other parent, and to accept continuing contact between the other parent and the children.

Grandparents who, after the parents separate, spend time with the children, and assist the parents, can be a great source of support to the family, helping the children to adjust. It is important, however, that grandparents allow the parents to stay in charge of raising the children. Although it can be hard to strike a balance between being available and “taking over,” such a balance is in the best interests of the children and parents.

My child is being difficult. Is it because she's a two year old, because she's adjusting to a new situation, or because something is really wrong?

Children tell us how they are doing in a language that fits their age. For example, we know a baby is doing well when she sleeps and eats on a regular schedule at both houses and is interested and alert with both parents. If the baby cries for a long time and can't be soothed, if eating and sleeping patterns are disrupted, or if she is slow to crawl, walk, or talk, there may be reason for concern. A well-adjusted toddler (age one-and-a-half to three years old) will be self-assertive, give his opinion, and will often cheerfully go along with a suggested task. An unhappy toddler may boss others around constantly, obey few directions, and be clinging and whiny. If he has begun toilet training or helping to dress himself, a distressed toddler may temporarily lose these skills when stressed. Preschoolers (age three to five years old) who are doing well often can wait, resist certain temptations, and hold back from hitting others when angry. They show a full range of feelings and have an active imagination. Those with more problems may have tantrums when not getting their way, have intense fears that won't go away, or be sad and withdrawn.

It is important to remember that all children show some problem behaviors as they meet the everyday challenges of growing up. For example, a two-year-old may become easily frustrated when he knows what he wants but can't quite find the words to tell you. In addition to the normal challenges all children face while growing, your children may react to the feelings in the household, the changes in the family, and the extra stresses they face. Many children are tired and irritable or clingy and whiny after moving between houses. Most children, however, recover after they settle into their usual routines. Their recovery is quicker when they are helped by the adults around them. You should be concerned about a child if you see a pattern of problem behaviors over time, and in different settings. When problem behaviors happen, what children don't need is parents who are pointing fingers of blame at each other. What they do need is parents who ask questions of one another: What are you noticing? What did you try? What worked? What didn't work? Has anything important changed recently? How can I be helpful to you in handling this? If the problem behaviors continue over a period of time, despite your efforts, it is important to talk with someone (such as your child's doctor or a parenting educator) who can help.

Usually, the changes around a divorce are different for everyone in the family at first. What will be helpful to the child may at first seem impossible to the adults. It hurts when your preschooler cries at night and then tells you, "I'm sorry I broke Daddy's cup. Will he come back now?" It is not easy to explain to a four-year-old complicated, angry, sad, adult decisions in an understandable and reassuring way. A toddler may need her mother to spend some time with her in the father's new apartment. Yet, the mother may not want to be anywhere near his place. Or the child may need her father to put her to bed at night at her mother's house for a few weeks to get used to him putting her to bed. Yet, neither parent may feel able to stand the father back in the house right away. Both the child's and the parent's needs and limits should be taken into account in planning parenting arrangements. Parents who are able to go the extra mile for their children, finding the strength and resources to control themselves and to handle very difficult situations, discover as time goes by that they and their children are doing very well.

A COMMON GROUND: DOLORES AND CARLOS

Dolores knows she is the best person for her 18-month-old daughter, Rosa. She can read the baby's signals, knows what makes her upset, and understands what makes her excited. She also knows that she needs to continue working, and that it is important for her daughter to have a close relationship with her father, Carlos. She wants to provide Rosa's home base. She also thinks of herself as having the job of helping Rosa have a positive experience in many different places. Dolores tries to keep herself informed about what happens when Rosa is with Carlos and works at passing on to Carlos useful information, without telling him what to do. She thought back to what helped Rosa adjust to the baby-sitter, and told Carlos her ideas on what seemed to work. Dolores has noticed that Rosa gets tired and cranky more easily since the separation, especially during transitions from Carlos' home to Dolores' home. Dolores now puts aside quiet, uninterrupted time to spend with Rosa after she returns from being with Carlos, and Rosa seems to handle changes better.

Carlos felt terrible when Rosa cried for her mother the first overnight at his apartment. He remembered, however, Dolores telling him that Rosa cried with the baby-sitter at first, but stopped once she became involved in an activity. He tried some of Dolores' ideas, but also a few of his own. For example, Carlos made up stories to tell Rosa. He experimented with nighttime routines until bedtime went smoothly. He knew Dolores would worry, so he made sure he told her his techniques for making bedtimes successful. He also let Dolores know his ideas about what needed to be similar between the two houses and what differences he thought Rosa could handle.

As Dolores and Carlos worked together, Rosa became more comfortable with moving back and forth between her two homes. The pediatrician told Carlos that Rosa was doing "everything an almost-two-year-old ought to be doing," and praised Carlos and Dolores for parenting so well together. From time to time, problems or disagreements come up, but Dolores and Carlos make the effort to take the time to talk with each other constructively until the problem is solved, reminding themselves that the most important thing is Rosa's best interest.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Generally, children do best when they receive consistent, committed, sensitive, caring, and competent care from both parents. Parents do best when they are helpful, supportive, and respectful of one another. These things are just as true when parents live apart as when they lived together. When parents separate, however, their ability to work well together to be the best parents they can be for their children can be seriously challenged, especially in the months right after they separate. A parent suffering from high personal stress is likely to feel depressed, anxious, moody, and preoccupied, making it difficult to be sensitive and calm with a fussy child. It is, therefore, important for parents in this situation to figure out what would help them feel better and to follow up on this insight. For example, plan in advance a few regular activities you enjoy, for when you have the children and for when they are with the other parent. Look for families in your community who provide good models of successful two-household parenting. Their experience may give you much needed support and good ideas. Close friends who are willing to listen when you are upset and angry, but who don't take sides or offer unwanted advice, can help you calm down and prepare for difficult encounters. Seek help from support groups and professionals if you need it.

PARENTING RESOURCES

Through local organizations such as the YMCA, community colleges, and religious groups, most communities have the following available resources, among others:

- Handouts on normal development for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers.
- Articles with checklists for picking a quality daycare provider.
- Parenting classes offering tips on handling typical situations.

Mental health professionals can also be helpful in identifying key issues for all family members and in helping you to constructively plan for your family. These kinds of resources can provide helpful information and support to parents going through separation and divorce.

CRITICAL PARENTING ISSUES AFTER SEPARATION

- Recognize and attend to your children's need for stable and predictable routines.
- Determine how you and the other parent can both make time to be with the children.
- Find information you need to make good decisions about your children's needs and challenges at each age.
- Find a common ground for parenting well together—for example, by finding ways to support the other parent's good parenting.

- Take care of yourself; find ways to feel good about yourself and to understand your confusing, contradictory feelings.
- Aim toward positive goals and remaining calm in trying situations.

CONCLUSIONS

Separation and divorce are challenging and emotional changes in all people's lives, whether they are adults or children. It is important to know that as much as you need extra support from those around you, your children also need extra love, time, attention, soothing, and consistency in order to handle these changes. Your children may also need things that at first seem impossible to you, such as learning to communicate well with the other parent about your children. You will be most helpful to your children if you get the support you need from family, friends, support groups, and professionals so that you will have the emotional energy to go what may feel like "the extra mile."

While you may never want to see your children's other parent, children need some consistency between homes to help ease the stress of changes. It is important, therefore, for separated parents to come up with some method of communicating about their children. It is best if you can have parenting conversations on a regular basis to prevent misunderstandings and keep small problems from becoming big. Whatever amount of contact you and your former partner have, it is important not to place your children in the middle of a conflict. No child is too young to notice parental conflict and such conflict can be very harmful to children of all ages.

Finally, try to remember that most families come through the difficult time of separation and divorce with happy, well-adjusted children and parents. If you or your children seem to be having trouble adjusting to the changes and are having problems that just won't seem to go away, your doctor, a parenting educator, counselor, or mediator may be able to help. Communication and sensitivity to all those involved, as well as finding support for all family members, are important for things to work out for the best.

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